

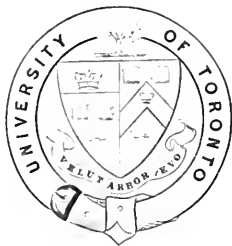
# GUINEVERE

ALFRED · LORD · TENNYSON

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BYAM · SHAW

PR  
5559  
G6  
18--





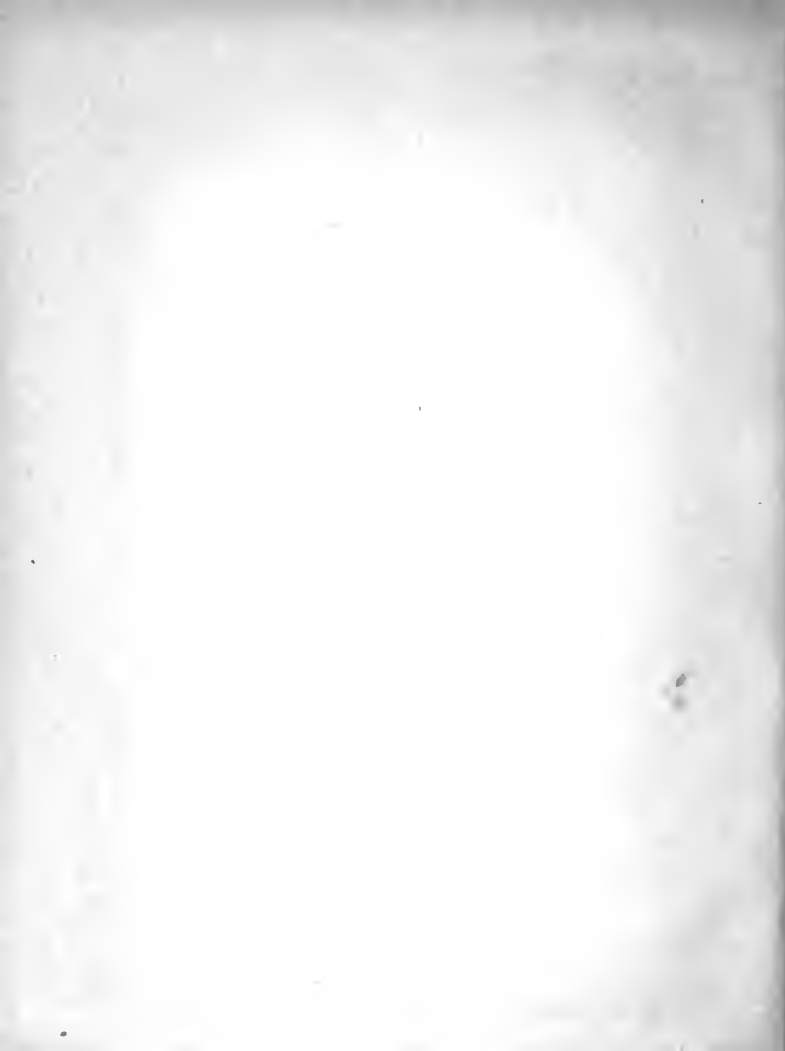
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# GUINEVERE





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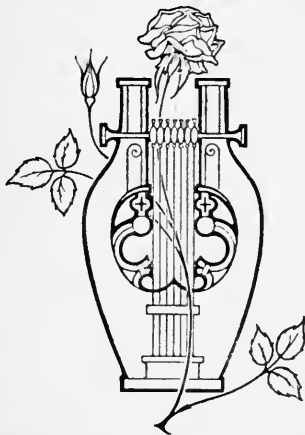
9.

... It was their last hour



GUINEVERE  
ALFRED · LORD · TENNYSON

ILLUSTRATED · BY  
BYAM · SHAW



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LONDON  
T · C · & · E · C · JACK  
AND · EDINBURGH

PR

5559

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18--

## GUINEVERE

QUEEN GUINEVERE had fled the court,  
and sat

There in the holy house at Almesbury  
Weeping, none with her save a little maid,  
A novice : one low light betwixt them burn'd  
Blurr'd by the creeping mist, for all abroad,  
Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,  
The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,  
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was  
still.

For hither had she fled, her cause of flight  
Sir Modred ; he the nearest to the King,  
His nephew, ever like a subtle beast  
Lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne,  
Ready to spring, waiting a chance : for this,  
He chill'd the popular praises of the King

## GUINEVERE

With silent smiles of slow disparagement ;  
And tamper'd with the Lords of the White  
Horse,  
Heathen, the brood by Hengist left ; and  
sought  
To make disruption in the Table Round  
Of Arthur, and to splinter it into feuds  
Serving his traitorous end ; and all his aims  
Were sharpen'd by strong hate for Lancelot.

For thus it chanced one morn when all  
the court,  
Green-suited, but with plumes that mock'd  
the may,  
Had been, their wont, a-maying and return'd,  
That Modred still in green, all ear and eye,  
Climb'd to the high top of the garden wall  
To spy some secret scandal if he might,  
And saw the Queen, who sat betwixt her  
best  
Enid, and lissome Vivien, of her court

## GUINEVERE

The wiliest and the worst ; and more than  
this

He saw not, for Sir Lancelot passing by  
Spied where he couch'd, and as the gardener's  
hand

Picks from the colewort a green caterpillar,  
So from the high wall and the flowering grove  
Of grasses Lancelot pluck'd him by the heel,  
And cast him as a worm upon the way ;  
But when he knew the Prince tho' marr'd  
with dust,

He, reverencing king's blood in a bad man,  
Made such excuses as he might, and these  
Full knightly without scorn ; for in those  
days

No knight of Arthur's noblest dealt in scorn ;  
But, if a man were halt or hunch'd, in him  
By those whom God had made full-limb'd and  
tall,

Scorn was allow'd as part of his defect,  
And he was answer'd softly by the King

## GUINEVERE

And all his Table. So Sir Lancelot help  
To raise the Prince, who rising, twice or  
thrice

Full sharply smote his knees, and smiled, and  
went :

But, ever after, the small violence done  
Rankled in him and ruffled all his heart,  
As the sharp wind that ruffles all day long  
A little bitter pool about a stone  
On the bare coast.

But when Sir Lancelot told  
This matter to the Queen, at first she laugh'd  
Lightly, to think of Modred's dusty fall,  
Then shudder'd, as the village wife who cries  
'I shudder, some one steps across my grave ;'  
Then laugh'd again, but faintlier, for indeed  
She half-foresaw that he, the subtle beast,  
Would track her guilt until he found, and  
hers

Would be for evermore a name of scorn.  
Henceforward rarely could she front in Hall,

## GUINEVERE

Or elsewhere, Modred's narrow foxy face,  
Heart-hiding smile, and gray persistent eye :  
Henceforward too, the Powers that tend the  
soul,

To help it from the death that cannot die,  
And save it even in extremes, began  
To vex and plague her. Many a time for  
hours,

Beside the placid breathings of the King,  
In the dead night, grim faces came and  
went

Before her, or a vague spiritual fear—  
Like to some doubtful noise of creaking doors,  
Heard by the watcher in a haunted house,  
That keeps the rust of murder on the walls—  
Held her awake : or if she slept, she dream'd  
An awful dream ; for then she seem'd to stand  
On some vast plain before a setting sun,  
And from the sun there swiftly made at her  
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew  
Before it, till it touch'd her, and she turn'd—

## GUINEVERE

When lo ! her own, that broadening from her  
feet,

And blackening, swallow'd all the land, and  
in it

Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke.

And all this trouble did not pass but grew ;

Till ev'n the clear face of the guileless King,

And trustful courtesies of household life,

Became her bane ; and at the last she said,

' O Lancelot, get thee hence to thine own  
land,

For if thou tarry we shall meet again,

And if we meet again, some evil chance

Will make the smouldering scandal break  
and blaze

Before the people, and our lord the King.'

And Lancelot ever promised, but remain'd,

And still they met and met. Again she  
said,

' O Lancelot, if thou love me get thee hence.'

And then they were agreed upon a night



## GUINEVERE

(When the good King should not be there) to  
meet

And part for ever. Passion-pale they met  
And greeted : hands in hands, and eye to eye,  
Low on the border of her couch they sat  
Stammering and staring : it was their last  
hour,

A madness of farewells. And Modred brought  
His creatures to the basement of the tower  
For testimony ; and crying with full voice  
'Traitor, come out, ye are trapt at last,'  
aroused

Lancelot, who rushing outward lionlike  
Leapt on him, and hurl'd him headlong, and  
he fell

Stunn'd, and his creatures took and bare him  
off

And all was still : then she, 'The end is come  
And I am shamed for ever ;' and he said,  
'Mine be the shame ; mine was the sin : but  
rise,

## GUINEVERE

And fly to my strong castle overseas :  
There will I hide thee, till my life shall end,  
There hold thee with my life against the  
world.'

She answer'd, 'Lancelot, wilt thou hold me  
so?

Nay, friend, for we have taken our farewells.  
Would God, that thou could'st hide me from  
myself!

Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou  
Unwedded : yet rise now, and let us fly,  
For I will draw me into sanctuary,  
And bide my doom.' So Lancelot got her  
horse,

Set her thereon, and mounted on his own,  
And then they rode to the divided way,  
There kiss'd, and parted weeping : for he past,  
Love-loyal to the least wish of the Queen,  
Back to his land ; but she to Almesbury  
Fled all night long by glimmering waste and  
weald,

## GUINEVERE

And heard the Spirits of the waste and weald  
Moan as she fled, or thought she heard them  
moan:

And in herself she moan'd, 'Too late, too late!'   
Till in the cold wind that foreruns the morn,  
A blot in heaven, the Raven, flying high,  
Croak'd, and she thought, 'He spies a field  
of death;

For now the Heathen of the Northern Sea,  
Lured by the crimes and frailties of the court,  
Begin to slay the folk, and spoil the land.'

And when she came to Almesbury she spake  
There to the nuns, and said, 'Mine enemies  
Pursue me, but, O peaceful Sisterhood,  
Receive, and yield me sanctuary, nor ask  
Her name, to whom ye yield it, till her time  
To tell you,' and her beauty, grace and power,  
Wrought as a charm upon them, and they  
spared  
To ask it.

## GUINEVERE

So the stately Queen abode  
For many a week, unknown, among the  
nuns ;  
Nor with them mix'd, nor told her name, nor  
sought,  
Wrapt in her grief, for housel or for shrift,  
But communed only with the little maid,  
Who pleased her with a babbling heedlessness  
Which often lured her from herself ; but now,  
This night, a rumour wildly blown about  
Came, that Sir Modred had usurped the  
realm,  
And leagued him with the heathen, while the  
King  
Was waging war on Lancelot : then she  
thought,  
'With what a hate the people and the King  
Must hate me,' and bow'd down upon her  
hands  
Silent, until the little maid, who brook'd  
No silence, brake it, uttering 'Late ! so late !

## GUINEVERE

What hour, I wonder, now?' and when she  
drew

No answer, by and by began to hum  
An air the nuns had taught her; 'Late, so  
late!'

Which when she heard, the Queen look'd up,  
and said,

'O maiden, if indeed you list to sing,  
Sing, and unbind my heart that I may  
weep.'

Whereat full willingly sang the little maid.

"Late, late, so late! and dark the night and  
chill!

Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.  
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

"No light had we: for that we do repent;  
And learning this, the bridegroom will  
relent.

Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

## GUINEVERE

“No light : so late ! and dark and chill the  
night !

O let us in, that we may find the light !  
Too late, too late : ye cannot enter now.

“Have we not heard the bridegroom is so  
sweet ?

O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet !  
No, no, too late ! ye cannot enter now.”

So sang the novice, while full passionately,  
Her head upon her hands, remembering  
Her thought when first she came, wept the  
sad Queen.

Then said the little novice prattling to her :

‘O pray you, noble lady, weep no more ;  
But let my words, the words of one so small,  
Who knowing nothing knows but to obey,  
And if I do not there is penance given—  
Comfort your sorrows ; for they do not flow

## GUINEVERE

From evil done ; right sure am I of that,  
Who see your tender grace and stateliness.  
But weigh your sorrows with our lord the  
King's,

And weighing find them less ; for gone is he  
To wage grim war against Sir Lancelot there,  
Round that strong castle where he holds the  
Queen ;

And Modred whom he left in charge of all,  
The traitor—Ah, sweet lady, the King's grief  
For his own self, and his own Queen, and  
realm,

Must needs be thrice as great as any of ours.  
For me, I thank the saints, I am not great.  
For if there ever come a grief to me  
I cry my cry in silence, and have done :  
None knows it, and my tears have brought  
me good :

But even were the griefs of little ones  
As great as those of great ones, yet this grief  
Is added to the griefs the great must bear,

## GUINEVERE

That howsoever much they may desire  
Silence, they cannot weep behind a cloud :  
As even here they talk at Almesbury  
About the good King and his wicked Queen,  
And were I such a King with such a Queen,  
Well might I wish to veil her wickedness,  
But were I such a King, it could not be.'

Then to her own sad heart mutter'd the  
Queen,  
'Will the child kill me with her innocent  
talk ?'  
But openly she answer'd, 'Must not I,  
If this false traitor have displaced his lord,  
Grieve with the common grief of all the  
realm ?'

'Yea,' said the maid, 'this is all woman's  
grief,  
That *she* is woman, whose disloyal life  
Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round



## GUINEVERE

Which good King Arthur founded, years ago,  
With signs and miracles and wonders, there  
At Camelot, ere the coming of the Queen.'

Then thought the Queen within herself  
again ;

'Will the child kill me with her foolish prate?'

But openly she spake and said to her ;

'O little maid, shut in by nunnery walls,

What canst thou know of Kings and Tables  
Round,

Or what of signs and wonders, but the signs  
And simple miracles of thy nunnery?'

To whom the little novice garrulously,

'Yea, but I know : the land was full of signs

And wonders ere the coming of the Queen.

So said my father, and himself was knight

Of the great Table—at the founding of it ;

And rode thereto from Lyonesse, and he said

That as he rode, an hour or maybe twain

## GUINEVERE

After the sunset, down the coast, he heard  
Strange music, and he paused and turning—  
there,

All down the lonely coast of Lyonesse,  
Each with a beacon-star upon his head,  
And with a wild sea-light about his feet,  
He saw them—headland after headland flame  
Far on into the rich heart of the west :  
And in the light the white mermaiden swam,  
And strong man-breasted things stood from  
the sea,

And sent a deep sea-voice thro' all the land,  
To which the little elves of chasm and cleft  
Made answer, sounding like a distant horn.  
So said my father—yea, and furthermore,  
Next morning, while he past the dim-lit  
woods,

Himself beheld three spirits mad with joy  
Come dashing down on a tall wayside flower,  
That shook beneath them, as the thistle  
shakes



9.

And strong man-breasted things stood from the sea.



## GUINEVERE

When three gray linnets wrangle for the  
seed :

And still at evenings on before his horse  
The flickering fairy-circle wheel'd and broke  
Flying, and link'd again, and wheel'd and  
broke

Flying, for all the land was full of life.  
And when at last he came to Camelot,  
A wreath of airy dancers hand-in-hand  
Swung round the lighted lantern of the  
hall ;

And in the hall itself was such a feast  
As never man had dream'd ; for every knight  
Had whatsoever meat he long'd for served  
By hands unseen ; and even as he said  
Down in the cellars merry bloated things  
Shoulder'd the spigot, straddling on the  
butts

While the wine ran : so glad were spirits and  
men

Before the coming of the sinful Queen.'

## GUINEVERE

Then spake the Queen and somewhat  
bitterly.

‘Were they so glad? ill prophets were they  
all,

Spirits and men: could none of them foresee,  
Not even thy wise father with his signs  
And wonders, what has fall’n upon the  
realm?’

To whom the novice garrulously again.  
‘Yea, one, a bard; of whom my father said,  
Full many a noble war-song had he sung,  
Ev’n in the presence of an enemy’s fleet,  
Between the steep cliff and the coming  
wave;

And many a mystic lay of life and death  
Had chanted on the smoky mountain-tops,  
When round him bent the spirits of the hills  
With all their dewy hair blown back like  
flame:

So said my father—and that night the bard

## GUINEVERE

Sang Arthur's glorious wars, and sang the  
King

As well-nigh more than man, and rail'd at  
those

Who call'd him the false son of Gorlois :

For there was no man knew from whence  
he came ;

But after tempest, when the long wave  
broke

All down the thundering shores of Bude and  
Boss,

There came a day as still as heaven, and  
then

They found a naked child upon the sands  
Of wild Dundagil by the Cornish sea ;

And that was Arthur ; and they foster'd him

Till he by miracle was approven king :

And that his grave should be a mystery

From all men, like his birth ; and could he  
find

A woman in her womanhood as great

## GUINEVERE

As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,  
The twain together well might change the  
world.

But even in the middle of his song  
He falter'd, and his hand fell from the  
harp,

And pale he turn'd, and reel'd, and would  
have fall'n,

But that they stay'd him up; nor would  
he tell

His vision; but what doubt that he foresaw  
This evil work of Lancelot and the Queen?'

Then thought the Queen 'Lo! they have  
set her on,

Our simple-seeming Abbess and her nuns,  
To play upon me,' and bow'd her head nor  
spake.

Whereat the novice crying, with clasp'd  
hands,

Shame on her own garrulity garrulously,



## GUINEVERE

Said the good nuns would check her gadding  
tongue

Full often, 'And, sweet lady, if I seem  
To vex an ear too sad to listen to me,  
Unmannerly, with prattling and the tales  
Which my good father told me, check me  
too :

Nor let me shame my father's memory, one  
Of noblest manners, tho' himself would say  
Sir Lancelot had the noblest ; and he died,  
Kill'd in a tilt, come next, five summers back,  
And left me ; but of others who remain,  
And of the two first famed for courtesy—  
And pray you check me if I ask amiss—  
But pray you, which had noblest, while  
you moved

Among them, Lancelot or our lord the King ?'

Then the pale Queen look'd up and  
answer'd her.

'Sir Lancelot, as became a noble knight,

## GUINEVERE

Was gracious to all ladies, and the same  
In open battle or the tilting-field  
Forbore his own advantage, and the King  
In open battle or the tilting-field  
Forbore his own advantage, and these two  
Were the most nobly-mannered men of all ;  
For manners are not idle, but the fruit  
Of loyal nature, and of noble mind.'

'Yea,' said the maid, 'be manners such fair  
fruit?

Then Lancelot's needs must be a thousand-  
fold

Less noble, being, as all rumour runs,  
The most disloyal friend in all the world.

To which a mournful answer made the  
Queen.

'O closed about by narrowing nunnery-walls,  
What knowest thou of the world, and all its  
lights

## GUINEVERE

And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?  
If ever Lancelot, that most noble knight,  
Were for one hour less noble than himself,  
Pray for him that he scape the doom of fire,  
And weep for her, who drew him to his doom.'

'Yea,' said the little novice, 'I pray for  
both ;

But I should all as soon believe that his,  
Sir Lancelot's, were as noble as the King's,  
As I could think, sweet lady, yours would be  
Such as they are, were you the sinful Queen.'

So she, like many another babbler, hurt  
Whom she would soothe, and harm'd where  
she would heal ;

For here a sudden flush of wrathful heat  
Fired all the pale face of the Queen, who  
cried,

'Such as thou art be never maiden more  
For ever ! thou their tool, set on to plague

## GUINEVERE

And play upon, and harry me, petty spy  
And traitress.' When that storm of anger  
    brake

From Guinevere, aghast the maiden rose,  
White as her veil, and stood before the Queen  
As tremulously as foam upon the beach  
Stands in a wind, ready to break and fly,  
And when the Queen had added 'get thee  
    hence'

Fled frightened. Then that other left alone  
Sigh'd, and began to gather heart again,  
Saying in herself 'The simple, fearful child  
Meant nothing, but my own too-fearful guilt  
Simpler than any child, betrays itself.  
But help me, heaven, for surely I repent.  
For what is true repentance but in thought—  
Not ev'n in inmost thought to think again  
The sins that made the past so pleasant  
    to us:

And I have sworn never to see him more,  
To see him more.'

## GUINEVERE

And ev'n in saying this,  
Her memory from old habit of the mind  
Went slipping back upon the golden days  
In which she saw him first, when Lancelot  
came,  
Reputed the best knight and goodliest man,  
Ambassador, to lead her to his lord  
Arthur, and led her forth, and far ahead  
Of his and her retinue moving, they,  
Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love  
And sport and tilts and pleasure (for the time  
Was maytime, and as yet no sin was dreamed,)  
Rode under groves that look'd a paradise  
Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth  
That seem'd the heavens upbreking thro' the  
earth,  
And on from hill to hill, and every day  
Beheld at noon in some delicious dale  
The silk pavilions of King Arthur raised  
For brief repast or afternoon repose  
By couriers gone before ; and on again,

## GUINEVERE

Till yet once more ere set of sun they saw  
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship,  
That crown'd the state pavilion of the King,  
Blaze by the rushing brook or silent well.

But when the Queen immersed in such a  
trance,  
And moving thro' the past unconsciously,  
Came to that point, when first she saw the  
King  
Ride toward her from the city, sigh'd to find  
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought  
him cold,  
High, self-contain'd, and passionless, not like  
him,  
'Not like my Lancelot'—while she brooded  
thus  
And grew half-guilty in her thoughts again,  
There rode an armed warrior to the doors.  
A murmuring whisper thro' the nunnery  
ran,

## GUINEVERE

Then on a sudden a cry, 'The King.' She sat  
Stiff-stricken, listening; but when armed feet  
Thro' the long gallery from the outer doors  
Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell,  
And grovell'd with her face against the floor:  
There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy  
hair

She made her face a darkness from the King:  
And in the darkness heard his armed feet  
Pause by her; then came silence, then a  
voice,

Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost's  
Denouncing judgment, but tho' changed the  
King's.

'Liest thou here so low, the child of one  
I honour'd, happy, dead before thy shame?  
Well is it that no child is born of thee.  
The children born of thee are sword and fire,  
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,  
The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts

## GUINEVERE

Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea.  
Whom I, while yet Sir Lancelot, my right  
arm,

The mightiest of my knights, abode with me,  
Have everywhere about this land of Christ  
In twelve great battles ruining overthrown.  
And knowest thou now from whence I come  
—from him,

From waging bitter war with him : and he,  
That did not shun to smite me in worse way,  
Had yet that grace of courtesy in him left,  
He spared to lift his hand against the King  
Who made him knight : but many a knight  
was slain ;

And many more, and all his kith and kin  
Clave to him, and abode in his own land.  
And many more when Modred raised revolt,  
Forgetful of their troth and fealty, clave  
To Modred, and a remnant stays with me.  
And of this remnant will I leave a part,  
True men who love me still, for whom I live,



## GUINEVERE

To guard thee in the wild hour coming on,  
Lest but a hair of this low head be harm'd.  
Fear not : thou shalt be guarded till my death.  
Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies  
Have err'd not, that I march to meet my doom.  
Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me,  
That I the King should greatly care to live ;  
For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life.  
Bear with me for the last time while I show,  
Ev'n for thy sake, the sin which thou hast  
sinn'd.

For when the Roman left us, and their law  
Relax'd its hold upon us, and the ways  
Were fill'd with rapine, here and there a deed  
Of prowess done redress'd a random wrong.  
But I was first of all the kings who drew  
The knighthood-errant of this realm and all  
The realms together under me, their Head,  
In that fair order of my Table Round,  
A glorious company, the flower of men,  
To serve as model for the mighty world,

## GUINEVERE

And be the fair beginning of a time.  
I made them lay their hands in mine and  
swear  
To reverence the King, as if he were  
Their conscience, and their conscience as  
their King,  
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,  
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,  
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,  
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,  
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
Until they won her ; for indeed I knew  
Of no more subtle master under heaven  
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,  
Not only to keep down the base in man,  
But teach high thought, and amiable words  
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,  
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.  
And all this throve until I wedded thee !  
Believing "lo mine helpmate, one to feel

## GUINEVERE

My purpose and rejoicing in my joy."  
Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot ;  
Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt ;  
Then others, following these my mightiest  
knights,

And drawing foul ensample from fair names,  
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite  
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,  
And all thro' thee ! so that this life of mine  
I guard as God's high gift from scathe and  
wrong,

Not greatly care to lose ; but rather think  
How sad it were for Arthur, should he live,  
To sit once more within his lonely hall,  
And miss the wonted number of my knights,  
And miss to hear high talk of noble deeds  
As in the golden days before thy sin.  
For which of us, who might be left, could  
speak

Of the pure heart, nor seem to glance at thee ?  
And in thy bowers of Camelot or of Usk

## GUINEVERE

Thy shadow still would glide from room to  
room,

And I should evermore be vexed with thee  
In hanging robe or vacant ornament,  
Or ghostly footfall echoing on the stair.  
For think not, tho' thou would'st not love thy  
lord,

Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.  
I am not made of so slight elements.  
Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.  
I hold that man the worst of public foes  
Who either for his own or children's sake,  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the  
house :

For being thro' his cowardice allow'd  
Her station, taken everywhere for pure,  
She like a new disease, unknown to men,  
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,  
Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and  
saps

## GUINEVERE

The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse  
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the  
young.

Worst of the worst were that man he that  
reigns!

Better the King's waste hearth and aching  
heart

Than thou reseated in thy place of light,  
The mockery of my people, and their bane.'

He paused, and in the pause she crept an  
inch

Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet.

Far off a solitary trumpet blew.

Then waiting by the doors the war-horse  
neigh'd

As at a friend's voice, and he spake again.

'Yet think not that I come to urge thy  
crimes,

I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,

## GUINEVERE

I, whose vast pity almost makes me die  
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,  
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.  
The wrath which forced my thoughts on that  
fierce law,

The doom of treason and the flaming death,  
(When first I learnt thee hidden here) is  
past.

The pang—which while I weigh'd thy heart  
with one

Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee,  
Made my tears burn—is also past, in part.

And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I,

Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God

Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the  
rest.

But how to take last leave of all I loved?

O golden hair, with which I used to play

Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form,

And beauty such as never woman wore,

Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee—

## GUINEVERE

I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine,  
But Lancelot's: nay, they never were the  
King's.

I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh,  
And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd: and mine  
own flesh,

Here looking down on thine polluted, cries  
"I loathe thee:" yet not less, O Guinevere,  
For I was ever virgin save for thee,  
My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my  
life

So far, that my doom is, I love thee still.  
Let no man dream but that I love thee still.  
Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,  
And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,  
Hereafter in that world where all are pure  
We two may meet before high God, and  
thou

Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and  
know

I am thine husband—not a smaller soul,

## GUINEVERE

Nor Lancelot, nor another. Leave me that,  
I charge thee, my last hope. Now must I  
hence.

Thro' the thick night I hear the trumpet  
blow :

They summon me their King to lead mine  
hosts

Far down to that great battle in the west,  
Where I must strike against my sister's son,  
Leagued with the lords of the White Horse  
and knights

Once mine, and strike him dead, and meet  
myself

Death, or I know not what mysterious doom.  
And thou remaining here wilt learn the event ;  
But hither shall I never come again,  
Never lie by thy side, see thee no more,  
Farewell !'

And while she grovell'd at his feet,  
She felt the King's breath wander o'er her  
neck,





And he gave them charge about the Queen



## GUINEVERE

And, in the darkness o'er her fallen head,  
Perceived the waving of his hands that blest.

Then, listening till those armed steps were  
gone,  
Rose the pale Queen, and in her anguish  
found  
The casement: 'Peradventure,' so she  
thought,  
'If I might see his face, and not be seen.'  
And lo, he sat on horseback at the door!  
And near him the sad nuns with each a light  
Stood, and he gave them charge about the  
Queen,  
To guard and foster her for evermore.  
And while he spake to these his helm was  
lower'd,  
To which for crest the golden dragon clung  
Of Britain; so she did not see the face,  
Which then was as an angel's, but she saw,  
Wet with mists and smitten by the lights,

## GUINEVERE

The Dragon of the great Pendragonship  
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.  
And even then he turn'd ; and more and more  
The moony vapour rolling round the King,  
Who seem'd the phantom of a Giant in it,  
Enwound him fold by fold, and made him  
gray

And grayer, till himself became as mist  
Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom.

Then she stretch'd out her arms and cried  
aloud  
'Oh Arthur !' there her voice brake suddenly,  
Then—as a stream that spouting from a cliff  
Fails in mid air, but gathering at the base  
Re-makes itself, and flashes down the vale—  
Went on in passionate utterance.

'Gone—my lord !  
Gone thro' my sin to slay and to be slain !  
And he forgave me, and I could not speak.  
Farewell? I should have answer'd his farewell.

## GUINEVERE

His mercy choked me. Gone, my lord the  
King,

My own true lord! how dare I call him  
mine?

The shadow of another cleaves to me,  
And makes me one pollution: he, the King,  
Call'd me polluted: shall I kill myself?

What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,  
If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame;  
No, nor by living can I live it down.

The days will grow to weeks, the weeks to  
months,

The months will add themselves and make  
the years,

The years will roll into the centuries,  
And mine will ever be a name of scorn.  
I must not dwell on that defeat of fame.

Let the world be; that is but of the world.  
What else? what hope? I think there was a  
hope,

Except he mock'd me when he spake of hope;

## GUINEVERE

His hope he call'd it ; but he never mocks,  
For mockery is the fume of little hearts.  
And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven  
My wickedness to him, and left me hope  
That in mine own heart I can live down sin  
And be his mate hereafter in the heavens  
Before high God. Ah great and gentle lord,  
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint  
Among his warring senses, to thy knights—  
To whom my false voluptuous pride, that  
took

Full easily all impressions from below,  
Would not look up, or half-despised the  
height

To which I would not or I could not climb—  
I thought I could not breathe in that fine  
air,

That pure severity of perfect light—  
I wanted warmth and colour which I found  
In Lancelot—now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,

## GUINEVERE

Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none  
Will tell the King I love him tho' so late?  
Now — ere he goes to the great Battle?  
none :

Myself must tell him in that purer life,  
But now it were too daring. Ah, my God,  
What might I not have made of thy fair  
world,

Had I but loved thy highest creature here?  
It was my duty to have loved the highest:  
It surely was my profit had I known:  
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.  
We needs must love the highest when we  
see it,

Not Lancelot, nor another.

Here her hand  
Grasp'd, made her vail her eyes: she look'd  
and saw

The novice, weeping, suppliant, and said to  
her,

' Yea, little maid, for am I not forgiven? '

## GUINEVERE

Then glancing up beheld the holy nuns  
All round her, weeping ; and her heart was  
loosed  
Within her, and she wept with these and  
said :

‘Ye know me then, that wicked one, who  
broke  
The vast design and purpose of the King.  
O shut me round with narrowing nunnery-  
walls,  
Meek maidens, from the voices crying  
“Shame.”  
I must not scorn myself : he loves me still.  
Let no one dream but that he loves me still.  
So let me, if you do not shudder at me  
Nor shun to call me sister, dwell with you ;  
Wear black and white, and be a nun like  
you ;  
Fast with your fasts, not feasting with your  
feasts :





9.

. . . There, an Abbess, lived  
For three brief years . . .



## GUINEVERE

Grieve with your griefs, not grieving at your  
joys,  
But not rejoicing ; mingle with your rites ;  
Pray and be pray'd for ; lie before your  
shrines ;  
Do each low office of your holy house ;  
Walk your dim cloister, and distribute dole  
To poor sick people, richer in his eyes  
Who ransom'd us, and haler too than I ;  
And treat their loathsome hurts and heal  
mine own ;  
And so wear out in almsdeed and in prayer  
The sombre close of that voluptuous day,  
Which wrought the ruin of my lord the  
King.'

She said: they took her to themselves ; and  
she  
Still hoping, fearing 'is it yet too late ?'  
Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess  
died.

## GUINEVERE

Then she, for her good deeds and her pure  
    life,  
And for the power of ministration in her,  
And likewise for the high rank she had borne,  
Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived  
For three brief years, and there, an Abbess,  
    past  
To where beyond these voices there is peace.





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Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson  
Guinevere

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